

**2005 White House Conference on Aging
July 21, 2005**

**Mini-Conference on Disability & Aging:
Seeking Solutions to Improve Health, Productivity and Community Living**

Keynote Presentation: Future Political Agenda for Disability and Aging

U.S. SENATOR SAM BROWNBACK (remarks as prepared for delivery).

I would like to thank Andrew Imparato from the American Association of People with Disabilities for inviting me to this event and welcome former White House National Economic Advisor, Gene Sperling. Also, I would like to commend the dedicated organizations with us today that advocate for individuals with disabilities. Finally, I welcome the opportunity to speak on these issues which are near and dear to my heart.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law almost exactly 15 years ago today. What a historic day that was; one that would affect the lives of millions of individuals with disabilities for years to come.

On February 1, 2001, President Bush announced the New Freedom Initiative—a comprehensive program to promote the full participation of people with disabilities in all areas of society by increasing access to assistive technologies, expanding educational and employment opportunities, and promoting increased access to daily community life.

Today, we have new challenges and new policy considerations. First, we must consider America's aging population. It is understood that the probability of having a disability increases with age. According to the U.S. Census, by the year 2050, 21 percent of America's total population will be age 65 and over. This means that America's population with disabilities will continue to grow.

It is imperative that we look for ways to meet the needs of this population and ensure that they can continue to live independent, fulfilling lives. Last week, I spent time with a constituent of mine who embodies this idea—a man named Rick Davidson from Olathe, Kansas. Rick is a motivational speaker for at-risk youth, has traveled across the country meeting with lawmakers on disabilities' policy issues, and is attending college for an associates' degree in web design. Rick has lived a healthy and active life as a quadriplegic for almost 18 years—doctors initially estimated that Rick had just 16 years to live. Another amazing individual from Kansas (who I think is with us in the audience today) is seven-year old Matthew Whaley. Matthew was denied access to the local recreation department's baseball league because he happened to have cerebral palsy. However, because of the Americans with Disabilities Act, he is now showing off his all-star baseball skills as an outfielder.

When I think about what Congress needs to accomplish for people with disabilities over the next few years, I consider what policies we need to change to ensure that Rick, Michael, and others with disabilities can continue making a positive difference in this world.

In the context of changing public policy, we must examine how effectively government programs, such as Medicare and Medicaid, are serving the needs of individuals with disabilities. For example, the Medicare program's benefit for mobility devices has an "in the home" restriction which limits coverage to only those mobility devices that are necessary within a patient's home. Unfortunately, this does not address the needs of a patient who would use this device to obtain access to his or her community, work, school, physician's office, pharmacy, or place of worship. In view of this, I recently signed on a letter requesting that Medicare's mobility device "in the home" restriction be modified to improve community access for Medicare recipients with disabilities.

Along these lines, Congress must address the issue of accessibility to long-term care for the elderly and those with disabilities. Currently, we have a Medicaid system that spends approximately two-thirds of its dollars on institutional care and approximately one-third on community services. This antiquated policy effectively removes disabled and elderly individuals from their community, family, and friends. Even from a cost perspective, this system does not make sense. According to the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, the cost of nursing home care ranges from \$30,000 to \$80,000 per year, while the annual cost of home and community care is much lower.

The bottom line is that Congress must work to align the Medicare and Medicaid programs with goals of the Americans with Disabilities Act. After all, we live in America and in this country we celebrate independence, self-determination, uniqueness, and a sense of community. We must maintain these ideals for our children as well. This year, I introduced the Prenatally Diagnosed Conditions Awareness Act. For some conditions that can be detected in the womb, we are aborting 80 percent or more of the babies who test positive. The effect of this sort of "weeding out" is creating a sort of new eugenics, a form of systematic, disability-based discrimination. The latter process is to the detriment of our society.

In addition to the many abilities that persons with disabilities have, these individuals so often have a perspective the rest of us don't have. We learn compassion, heroism, humility, courage, and self-sacrifice from these special individuals—and their gift to us is to inspire us, by their example, to achieve these virtues ourselves. I am also a co-sponsor of legislation that would offer lower-income families who have children with disabilities the opportunity to acquire health care coverage through the Medicaid program.

In our discussion of fostering independence, we must keep in mind the importance of guaranteeing all individuals their right to vote. Our citizens with disabilities deserve equal access and an equal voice in our democratic process. Initiatives such as the Help America Vote Act, enacted in 2002, created vital grant programs ensuring electoral participation by persons with disabilities and making polling places accessible to persons with disabilities. Congress must continue to look for ways to expand access to our electoral system for persons with disabilities.

While we can change public policy to reflect the ideas embodied in the Americans with Disabilities Act, it is just as important to seek change at the individual level. Every human being has the ability to change their own ideas and actions in their daily life as they meet an elderly person or a person with disabilities. As Americans, we have a God-given duty to love each and every person, and treat them, not as a means to an end, but as an end in-and-of themselves. As a nation, we are so blessed with the presence of individuals who are different than us, and who have the ability to teach us; to teach us about love, about compassion, and about what it means to have strength and courage from within.

My vision for America is one where we as citizens celebrate the breadth of experience and life lessons that persons who are elderly or who have disabilities offer us; how our children and grandchildren would benefit from this.

Over 137, 000 individuals with disabilities reside in my state of Kansas. My hope for them is my hope for all Americans who are elderly or who have disabilities: that we as a society and as a government do everything in our power to foster their independence, to nurture their soul and to embrace their contributions to society.